

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

## Spain and Portugal

Number 897

1988

Idaho has a large Hispanic population, mostly of Mexican origin. Not very many arrived directly from Spain. A substantial Basque migration, mostly from Spain, also reached Idaho, as did some Portuguese. A surprising number of Azores Islands immigrants constitute Idaho's Portuguese element. So European Spanish and Portuguese settlers from such a small minority of Idaho Basque and Hispanic peoples that they can be identified only with considerable difficulty. Spanish culture—largely of Mexican derivation—is of primary importance in Idaho's placer mining camps and cattle ranches. Native Spaniards, as well as Mexicans, engaged in mining along streams such as Elk Creek near Rocky Bar. Language and customs helped them to work together, and their contributions to Idaho's development are not easily distinguished. Portuguese activities in nineteenth-century Idaho—such as railroad construction—attracted enough notice that they can be explained more readily. But their Azorian predominance distinguishes them from peninsular Portuguese immigrants.

Enterprising Azorian prospectors made a long journey from their Atlantic homeland to participate in Idaho's early mining development. When George Grimes' 1862 gold hunters decided to set out from Fort Boise to try their luck in Boise Basin, 20% of their number were Azores Portuguese, and after they succeeded in opening up Idaho's largest placer mines, hundreds of their countrymen joined them. As late as 1870, after Boise Basin's initial wave of population had passed on to seek out other opportunities, more than 200 Azorian miners still were at work on Grimes Creek. Along with Irish settlers, they constituted a major ethnic element there, retaining their distinctive island identity.

Unlike peninsular Portuguese, nineteenth-century Azores colonists had to search for new homes in large numbers because of overpopulation at home. With an area less than Ada County, their Azores vineyards, orange groves, sugar plots, and wheat fields had been settled less than a century before Columbus sailed by on his way west in 1492. After their population density exceeded that of practically any rural European area, North America became a preferred haven for thousands of Azorian migrants.

Idaho was by no means their only destination when their nineteenth-century exodus had to accommodate ever-increasing numbers of people who could not acquire land to work on at home.

Two decades after their participation in Boise Basin gold discoveries, Azorian immigrants were active laying Oregon Short Line Railway tracks across southern Idaho. In 1882, they got involved in a hotly-contested Alturas County election, in which they participated with more enthusiasm than most other voters showed. They took enough time off from their construction duties to roll up a large Republican margin in a Democratic county by voting all day. Casting more than one ballot per person, they helped provide 700 Republican votes, compared with only 50 for some surprised Democratic office holders who were defeated by that interesting tactic by which their construction camp cast more votes than were recorded in Hailey or Bellevue. Idaho's Azorian voters clearly were inexperienced in local elections, they may have had no idea that their participation was unconventional. Alturas County's Democratic officials were resourceful enough to throw out that entire precinct's vote on a technicality unrelated to Azorian voting customs, but by that time their construction camp had moved westward anyway.